Preview

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# Once and Future Kingpin?

*By John Carmody*

An ABC News Close-Up on Jimmy Hoffa, the once and just maybe future Teamster Union boss, is surely one of the more curious and compelling "investigative biographies" of the TV season. It airs tonight at 8 on Channel 7.

Its curiousness arises from the network's decision to do the documentary just now. When Hoffa's two 1967 prison terms (for jury tampering and mail fraud in connection with a union pension fund) were commuted and pardoned by President Nixon in 1971, a key condition barred him from union activity until 1980.

Yet these days he is reportedly making a strong play to return to the presidency of Local 299 in Detroit, his long-time power base, with an eye on a return to the giant union's presidency in 1976.

The manuevering drew a warning as recently as a week ago from the Justice Department that such activities were being "very closely watched" for possible violations of the pardon.

Since ABC first announced intentions to film this program (with Hoffa's full cooperation) producer Stephen Fleischman admitted yesterday, "there has been heat from all sides, including quite a few newspaper" suggestions "it would be a 'whitewash.'"

Fleischman heatedly denies the program is any such thing and the TV viewer unschooled in the ways of bigtime union politics will certainly not find tonight's portrait of Hoffa a first step towards canonization.

Nevertheless, the program does focus on the Hoffa loyalist factions within the 2-million member union and it does permit the deposed leader to call Frank Fitzsimmons, the current president (and former Hoffa follower) a double-crosser.

The showcase also allows him to give an unchallenged, chilling and cynical explanation of his sometime association with mobsters that in some circles has al the impact of a campaign speech, and could be considered one.

On the other hand, there is a genuine topicality that can justify the hour. Charles Colson and Fitzsimmons are on view to deny any charges of collusion in the presidential pardon arrangements (Fitzsimmons says Hoffa is a "liar"—a favorite word with the principal antagonists, both of whom offer no solid evidence one way or the other on lying or on a variety of other charges).

More to the point, Hoffa states bluntly tonight that there is a union fight coming up and that he wants to be a part of it. Of course, he is talking about a deep recession and thus the threat of a return to the kind of union-management violence that vast unemployment and lower wages could bring about all across the nation, in many unions.

That kind of union struggle was the breeding ground for James Hoffa, and some of tonight's old film vividly recalls the 1930s turmoil in the Minneapolis area where he first made his reach toward power in the movement (while on the West Coast, his Teamster president predecessor Dave Beck was engaged in the same kind of activity during the Depression).

The program, in fact, seems to suggest that such a violent birthright made subsequent union collaboration with organized crime understandable, if never palatable.

And it is at this juncture in the fast-moving hour, when James Hoffa moves into a position of national power in the late 1950s and comes into direct conflict with Sen. John McClellan and his young counsel Robert F. Kennedy, that the program enters still another area of topicality.

*See HOFFA, C6, Col. 1*

# Hoffa: A Curious, Compelling Report

*HOFFA, From C1*

It was Kennedy—then and subsequently as Attorney General—who mounted the final attack on the union leader. Several members of the so-called "Hoffa squad" that was then organized to bring him down are now central figures in the current Watergate tragedy. William Bittman (who obtained the fraud conviction of Hoffa in Chicago) and James Neal (who successfully prosecuted Hoffa in Chattanooga) both appear tonight.

Walter Sheridan, now a member of the staff of the Senate subcomittee on health, is tonight singled out by the tough-talking Hoffa as a "slimy, sleazy rat" for his investigative role in obtaining the jury wiretap conviction.

Sheridan, long a close associate of the Kennedys, refused to appear on the program to respond to the insult, ostensibly because of his current assignment.

For other, more politic, reasons, Herbert J. (Jack) Miller, former head of the criminal division of the Department of Justice and now President Nixon's attorney, likewise declined to appear on the program, though he had a key role in the jailing of Hoffa.

Reportedly, several of these major figures from Hoffa's recent history are not pleased with ABC's decision to give the convicted labor leader a national showcase at this time.

Almost everything that is shown tonight is based on stories that have appeared in publications around the country over the past two decades but that does not reduce the power of the program, ill-timed or not.

It is a needed insight into the kind of people who run or seek to run still another one of our troubled national institutions.

What we see tonight, from discredited White House aide to tough-talking, repentant union leader, is what this country has been getting in recent years and it should make us very uneasy indeed.